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In Absentia

Where are India's conservative intellectuals?

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BCCI

Romila Thapar is part of a generation of Indian historians who were influenced in varying degrees by left-wing or liberal thought



| ONE |

THERE IS A PARADOX at the heart of Indian public life today: that while the country has a right-wing party in power, right-wing intellectuals run thin on the ground. This makes India an exception among the world's established democracies. The United States, the United Kingdom and Germany all have a long lineage of first-rate intellectuals on the right, who continue to provide ballast to parties such as the Republicans in America, the Conservatives in Britain, and the Christian Democrats in Germany. On the other hand, while the Bharatiya Janata Party enjoys political power in India, it can command the support of few well-known or widely published intellectuals.

The shortage became strikingly apparent last August, when Y Sudershan Rao was appointed the chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research. It has further manifested itself in the growing influence over school curricula of Dina Nath Batra. Rao's publication list is meager—he wrote one little-noticed book 25 years ago, and has no publications in peer-reviewed journals. From the statements he has made since assuming office, it is clear he does not know the difference between fact and fiction, or between history and myth. Batra's claims to scholarship are even more tenuous. He is of the view that when god made man, he placed the various strands of humanity in an oven—the strain taken out too early became the whites, the strain taken out too late became the blacks, the strain taken out at just the right time became the brown Indians, perfectly coloured and destined thereafter to rule the world.

Both Rao and Batra have long-standing connections with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Although the RSS describes itself as a cultural organisation, it is in fact intensely ideological and deeply political. Its ultimate goal is the construction of a

Hindu *rashtra*, a state run by and for Hindus. The RSS has very close ties with the BJP—as it did with the party's predecessor, the Jana Sangh—supplying it with cadres, ministers, and an unending stream of advice.

Rao and Batra's influence over public policy is based not on their claims to scholarship but on the strength of their links to the RSS. Their statements and proposals have attracted a fair amount of criticism, largely merited, in the media. This could have been avoided if, instead of Rao and Batra, the new government had promoted and patronised scholars with political views congenial to the ruling dispensation and with a string of books and research papers to their name. That alternative, alas, was not available, since intellectuals who meet this twin desiderata do not exist.

One must distinguish here between the work done by intellectuals and that done by ideologues. Each academic discipline has its own protocols on what constitutes serious scholarship. Historians dig deeply into primary material, whether letters or manuscripts or state documents or court records or temple inscriptions; and sociologists and anthropologists do extended fieldwork in the locations they study. Their first-hand, original research is then written up and analysed, and presented in scholarly papers in academic journals or in books brought out by established publishers. The judgment on one's scholarly work comes principally from one's colleagues—first, before it is published, as part of the peer-review process practiced by professional journals and book publishers, and then, once it is in print, by how often the work is cited.

There is a distinction to be drawn between intellectuals and ideologues, who are more interested in promoting their political or religious beliefs than in contributing to the growth of knowledge. The writings of ideologues are rarely based on serious or extended research. There is a tendency to selectively invoke or suppress facts to buttress conclusions decided upon in advance. Of course, intellectuals are citizens too, with their own views on what constitutes a prosperous and just society. Their scholarship and writing does—perceptibly or imperceptibly—reflect their political views. The distinction between an ideologue and an intellectual is not absolute, yet is worth emphasising. For, unlike intellectuals, ideologues care little about the reception of their work by scholars. They wish to influence not so much the course of knowledge as the course of social or political change.

There are plenty of right-wing ideologues in India, active in our newspapers, television channels, and on social media, but very few right-wing intellectuals. This paucity contrasts with the preponderance of credible intellectuals in the centre or on the left of the political spectrum. If I was to draw up a list of the most highly regarded Indian historians of my generation, the names of Seema Alavi, Shahid Amin, Nayanjot Lahiri, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Janaki Nair, Chetan Singh, Upinder Singh and AR Venkatachalapathy would certainly figure. Although these scholars do not advertise which party they vote for, their published work makes it clear that their intellectual orientation is far removed from that prescribed by the RSS or proposed by the BJP.

Turn next to the discipline of political science. Here, the most influential scholars working in India today include Rajeev Bhargava, Peter DeSouza, Zoya Hasan, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Gurpreet Mahajan, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Suhas Palshikar and Valerian Rodrigues. All would describe themselves as liberals or socialists. Move to sociology, and much the same can be said of Amita Baviskar, Dipankar Gupta, Surinder Jodhka, Nandini Sundar, AR Vasavi and Susan Visvanathan, who are some of the more respected Indian scholars now active in this field.

At first sight, the discipline of economics—the most active of the social sciences in shaping public policy—might seem an exception. If we define the “left-wing” position here as preferring a greater role in the economy for the state and the “right-wing” one as favouring the market, there has undoubtedly been a shift towards the latter tendency in recent years. Back in 1954, when an early draft of the Second Five Year Plan was shown to 24 Indian economists, as many as 23 approved of its proposal to make the state occupy the “commanding heights” of the economy. If a similar document was to make the rounds now, perhaps three in four Indian economists would argue that the market and individual entrepreneurs, rather than the state and its bureaucrats, should play the leading role in generating economic growth and ending poverty.

Economics is the most technical of the social sciences, relying heavily on quantitative methods of analysis. The political or philosophical orientations of economists are, therefore, much more understated than those of sociologists or historians. That said, it seems to me that India's most admired free-market economists are, almost without exception, socially liberal. Consider the doyen in the field, Jagdish Bhagwati, who lives and works in the United States but has a substantial influence on Indian intellectual life. Bhagwati's disenchantment with the welfare-first, subsidy-oriented economic policies of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance regime, and of Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council in particular, led him to support Narendra Modi and the BJP, whom he saw as more sympathetic to entrepreneurship, innovation and economic growth. However, despite his long-standing and consistent orientation towards market liberalisation, Bhagwati remains a great admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru, whose commitment to religious and social pluralism he shares. On his most recent visit to India, the economist spoke out

against the RSS and its affiliates, including the Vishva Hindu Parishad, in several speeches and interviews. Bhagwati also warned the prime minister, Modi, of the peril to his economic agenda if he did not come out strongly against the religious extremists in his party and the extended family of Hindutva organisations, known as the Sangh Parivar.

In this respect Bhagwati is representative. Virtually all important free-market economists in India refuse to discriminate among citizens by religion, are committed to the rights of gays and lesbians, and so on. While they may support or vote for the BJP in the belief that it is comparatively market-friendly, they do not in any way endorse the party's suspicion of religious and sexual minorities. Ashok Desai, a former chief economic adviser to the government, has recently and emphatically written, "No respectable economist has Hindu nationalist inclinations: the ideology is mistaken according to economics."

To be sure, there are influential columnists in the Indian media who would be happy to own the labels "conservative" and "right-wing." Yet their output is restricted to thousand-word columns and fleeting sound bites on television, neither of which is congenial to subtle or substantial arguments about history, politics and society.

There are also influential right-wing voices on social media. One of them is Subramanian Swamy, who has more than a million followers on Twitter. Swamy once taught economics at Harvard, but it is 40 years since he has been active in research. Now he is better known for floating conspiracy theories about politicians he dislikes, for demonising minorities—in 2011, he argued that Muslims should not be part of the general electorate—and for demanding that books by left-wing scholars be burnt. Once an intellectual, he is now—at best—a provocateur.

Perhaps the only serious intellectual in India who is also socially conservative is Arun Shourie. Unlike Sudershan Rao or Dina Nath Batra, or indeed the right-wing columnists referred to above, Shourie has published a number of books based on original research. These expand on distinctively conservative themes, such as the importance of national unity and solidarity, the dangers of excessive cultural heterogeneity, and the threat to India from external enemies—namely China and Pakistan. Shourie has been a BJP member of parliament, and a minister in a BJP-controlled government. Originally trained as an economist, unlike India's other free-market thinkers he wears his conservative political and social orientation on his sleeve.

| TWO |

WHY ARE THERE SO FEW CONSERVATIVE intellectuals in India? Before I answer the question, I must more clearly define what I mean by "conservative." I take the aid here of the sociologist Karl Mannheim, who in his classic work *Ideology and Utopia* laid out a still-useful distinction between three major political orientations in the modern world, namely "liberalism," "conservatism," and "socialism."

Mannheim argued that liberalism was a rationalist response to the religious fervour of the late Middle Ages. It sought a "dynamic middle course" between feudal oppression and the "vindictiveness of oppressed strata" that religiously oriented rebels represented. As a philosophy of social action, liberalism is future-oriented, seeking progress in human evolution.

The conservative critique of liberalism is that it lacks concreteness. Conservatives focus not on possible futures but on life as it is actually lived. Mannheim wrote that "For conservatism everything that exists has a positive and nominal value merely because it has come into existence slowly and gradually." Consequently, "not only is attention turned to the past and the attempt made to rescue it from oblivion, but the presentness and immediacy of the whole past becomes an actual experience."

As for socialism, like liberalism it works towards and looks forward to a future where freedom and equality have been established. But whereas liberalism's orientation is gradualistic, socialism actively seeks the breakdown of the capitalist order. And while liberalism is resolutely anti-utopian, many socialists believe that they can construct a perfect society in the future.

Mannheim's book was an intellectual response to the political debates of inter-war Europe. *Ideology and Utopia* was first published in German in 1929, and in an English translation in 1936. So let me turn to a more recent work, *How to Be a Conservative*, published in 2014 by the prolific and respected British philosopher Roger Scruton.

For Scruton, the starting point of conservatism is the sentiment that "good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created." The "good things" that he believes Britain should conserve are "peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life." Scruton mounts a vigorous defence of the nation-state. Rejecting the idea of global citizenship, he insists that people who belong to a particular territory with a shared history can more easily create a culture of community and cooperation.

At the same time, he argues, in opposition to other conservatives, that reason and law rather than faith or religion should guide public affairs. Invoking the example of Lebanon, he writes, "Democracy will always be jeopardised in places where identities are confessional rather than territorial." Scruton thinks conservatives should accept and endorse the fundamental premise of post-Enlightenment thought: "the radical distinction between religious and political order, and the need to build the art of government without depending on the law of God." Scruton's model conservative is the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, who "made the case for a society shaped from below, by traditions that have grown from our natural need to associate," rather than from above, imposed by a powerful state and an all-knowing political elite.

Conservatism, Scruton continues, rests on acquiring and affirming "a first-person plural—a place, a community and a way of life that is 'ours.'" For him, this first-person plural "is a national rather than a religious 'we.'" He argues that "it is not for the state to impose religion on the citizen or to require doctrinal conformity," for "religious obedience is not a necessary part of citizenship, and in any conflict it is the duties of the citizen, and not those of the believer, that must prevail." Whereas conservatives, unlike atheist socialists or scientistic liberals, respect the role of religion in providing "peace, hope and consolation," they "must concede to others the right to be different" in the god or gods they worship.

"Unless and until people identify themselves with the country," Scruton writes, "its territory and its cultural inheritance—in something like the way people identify themselves with a family—the politics of compromise [necessary for democratic functioning] will not emerge."

Applying Scruton's model to India immediately poses a fundamental problem. What, here, is the first-person plural? Does the "we" of Indian-ness include Indian Muslims and Indian Christians acting and thinking as Muslims and Christians? For the British conservative, Christianity is one building block of his philosophy. Scruton himself would argue that a respect for property, the affirmation of family ties and the nurturing of a charitable ethos are Christianity's contributions to conservatism, but he would not make the profession of the Christian faith a *sine qua non* for membership in the national community. For him, British Muslims and British Hindus do not have to convert to Christianity, or even acknowledge its primacy in national life.

On the other hand, the conservative tradition in India, enunciated by the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha and the ideologues associated with these groups, believes that nationhood is intricately bound up with religious affiliation. Thus VD Savarkar's famous distinction between *pitrabhumi* and *punjabhumi*: between the land of our fathers and the land sacred to our faith. For Savarkar, the two coincided for India's Hindus and Sikhs, but not for its Muslims and Christians. Hindu and Sikh holy places were in India itself; Muslim and Christian holy places lay elsewhere. This, Savarkar thought, immediately made suspect the patriotic commitment of Indian Muslims and Christians.

For British conservatives such as Scruton, the dominant religion is merely one of several factors in nurturing a national ethos. For the Indian conservative, on the other hand, religious affiliation is both constitutive and definitive, and only Hindus, Sikhs and Jains are seen here as true or thoroughbred members of the national community.

As the historian Dharma Kumar once pointed out, this Hindu-first and Hindu-foremost model of citizenship mimicked the political theology of medieval Islam, under which only Muslims could be full-blooded citizens of the state. Jews and Christians, as "people of the book," came under the category of *dhimmi*: they were subjects rather than citizens, allowed to work, pray and own property so long as they stayed away from politics and public affairs.

Modern Hindu conservatism, which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in reaction to the impact of Western colonialism, harked back to a pre-British and pre-Islamic past. Notably, through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the first-person plural for Indian conservatives excluded untouchables as well as Muslims and Christians. It is now forgotten that, during his lifetime, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's fiercest critics were on the Hindu right. A number of influential Hindu priests even signed a collective petition demanding that Gandhi and his followers be declared "non-Hindus" for daring to challenge untouchability, a practice these priests believed had irrefutable scriptural sanction.

The persistence of Gandhi's campaign against untouchability, and the emergence of an even more radical critique of caste articulated by BR Ambedkar, finally led that conservative bastion to crumble, at least in intellectual and ideological terms. Untouchability is still practiced in many parts of India, but no Hindu thinker or politician will now seek to defend it.

However, the reluctance to include Muslims and Christians in the first-person plural remains. The more hard-line conservatives believe that followers of these two faiths can never be trusted. Hence the sporadic campaigns to convert—or, as the propagandists would have it, "re-convert"—Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Even where a change of faith is not asked for,

Muslims and Christians are told to declare their primary commitment to this land of Hindus by re-designating themselves Hindu Muslims and Hindu Christians, respectively.

In this respect, Indian conservatism may be closer to its American rather than British counterpart. In his 2004 book *Who Are We?*, the political scientist Samuel Huntington defined what he called the “American Creed,” whose constituent elements are “the Christian religion, Protestant values and moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice, and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy and music.” The United States, he holds, “was created as a Protestant society just as and for some of the reasons Pakistan and Israel were created as Muslim and Jewish societies....”

For Huntington, the United States is defined by a “single pervasive national culture.” This American creed had held the nation together in times of peace and war, and provided citizens with a shared identity and a collective purpose. In Huntington’s rendition, it was a creed based unequivocally on Protestantism. As he wrote, “Throughout American history people who were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestants have become Americans by adopting America’s Anglo-Protestant culture and political values.”

In the modern Indian variety of conservatism, religion plays an even more hegemonic role than in the American or Protestant variety. The core of Indian nationhood is premised here on the centrality of the Hindu religion, the propagation of Hindu values as defined in works such as the Bhagavad Gita, and the revival and spread of the Sanskrit language, in which the Hindu epics and scriptures were written.

For European or American conservatives, the love of one’s country does not necessarily exclude the possibility of absorbing cultural influences, or even human migrants, from other countries or continents. The nationalism of the Hindu conservative, on the other hand, is a curious combination of xenophobia and triumphalism. On the one side, it seeks to keep out outsiders and outside influences—thus the demonisation of Westernised intellectuals allegedly raised on a diet of “Macaulay, Mill and Marx”. On the other, it claims that Hindus are heirs to a cultural and intellectual tradition superior to those of other civilisations or nations. So it has been argued that the Vedas are the oldest holy texts, and the Upanishads and the Gita the most profound philosophical texts. Prime Minister Modi, no less, has claimed that the existence of the elephant-headed god Ganesh proves the ancient Hindus had mastered the complex science of plastic surgery.

Hindu conservatives have long believed that, after their nation becomes powerful and rich, they are destined to remake the world in their image. Representative here are the views of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Jana Sangh. In a talk in Bilaspur in December 1944, Mookerjee insisted that a reassertion of Hinduism will “not only bring relief to the suffering millions of India but to the rest of the world as well.” Unlike the materialistic West, he claimed, “Hinduism has emphasised the spiritual nature of man.” No country other than India could “offer the correct synthesis which will be the guiding factor for giving birth to a new human civilisation.”

Hindu conservatism tends to be revivalist, harking back to a pure past uncontaminated by foreign influences or alien faiths. Meanwhile, Hindu nationalism tends to be triumphalist, seeking to remake other nations and cultures in its own image. Both tendencies are inimical to reflection and self-criticism—two crucial, even indispensable, elements of the intellectual’s craft.

| THREE |

TO UNDERSTAND why conservative scholars are so scarce in India, let me flip the question to ask why liberal and socialist traditions have been so dominant in the intellectual life of the country.

When India’s first modern universities were being founded, in the nineteenth century, the subcontinent was under British control. Unlike in the West, here the social sciences as we know them took shape under the experience of colonial rule. At the same time, Indian society itself was marked by deep social and economic inequalities.

In this scenario of alien rule and endemic poverty, Indian social scientists naturally looked forward rather than back, to a time when they and their country would be free, and India would stand as a nation of equal citizens. In Mannheimian terms, liberalism and socialism were far more attractive in twentieth-century India than conservatism. Rather than keep what they had, which was colonial rule and poverty, Indian intellectuals wished to shape and create a world free of political oppression and social discrimination.

The spread of these ideas was also enabled by nationalist politicians. In its march to independence, India was guided by

several generations of thinker-activists—politicians and social reformers who wrote major works of scholarship or political analysis. Among the most influential of them were Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a classical liberal reared on John Stuart Mill and John Morley, who urged the British to grant to Indians the same democratic liberties their own people enjoyed; Jawaharlal Nehru, a modernising socialist influenced both by the Russian Revolution and by British Fabian thought; BR Ambedkar, an economist and legal theorist educated at those two bastions of progressive thought, Columbia University and the London School of Economics; Ram Manohar Lohia, who received a PhD in political science from Berlin, and whose personal experience of Nazi brutality made him a socialist for life; and Jayaprakash Narayan, whose experience of studying and working in the United States during the Depression oriented him towards the left.

Gokhale, Nehru, Ambedkar, Lohia and Narayan were all prolific writers, commenting on Indian and global affairs and laying out ideas for India's economic and social reform once the country became free. To this line of liberal and left-wing thinker-activists there was arguably only one conservative counterpart: VD Savarkar, a man who posthumously emerged as an icon of the Hindu right, but in fact spent his last decades in obscurity.

Two of the most significant thinker-activists of the colonial period did not work within frameworks derived from Western political categories. Neither Rabindranath Tagore nor Mohandas Gandhi were liberals in the sense Ambedkar was, nor socialists in the sense Nehru proclaimed himself to be. Yet they both wrote extensively on matters of public concern, and both were attentively read by young Indians. Tagore's searing critiques of nationalism made Indian intellectuals less xenophobic in their approach to the world. Like the poet, they came to believe that they should glory in the illumination of a lamp lit anywhere in the world. Meanwhile, Gandhi's campaign against untouchability and his life-long struggle for harmony between Hindus and Muslims encouraged Indian intellectuals to imagine a first-person plural that embraced more than caste Hindus alone.

In this manner, the dominant political trends of late colonial India, as well as the most influential politicians, encouraged the spread of liberal and socialist ideas among intellectuals. These ideas then took institutional shape. In 1930, DR Gadgil, an admirer of Gokhale and a friend of Ambedkar's, established India's first centre for social-science research, the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics. A year later, PC Mahalanobis, who was close to both Tagore and Nehru, established the Indian Statistical Institute, which coordinated the writing of the Five Year Plans in independent India. In 1949, VKRV Rao, a Cambridge-trained economist who admired Gandhi and Nehru, set up the Delhi School of Economics, the country's premier teaching and research centre for economists. (With the establishment of a department of sociology, in 1959, the Delhi School became India's leading centre for that discipline as well.) In 1963, Rajni Kothari, a friend of Jayaprakash Narayan, set up the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, which has since become recognised as the country's premier research centre for political science.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the appeal of Marxism also grew steadily among Indian intellectuals. The apparent achievements of Soviet industrialisation, that allowed the Russians to beat the Germans in battle and the Americans in the race to space; the success of a peasant-led revolution in neighbouring China; the stirring call to action in the economic and sociological writings of Marx himself; the manifest class inequalities within India; the electoral successes of Communist parties in Kerala and West Bengal—all played a part in this. Marxist influence was most marked in the discipline of history, in part due to the pioneering works of the polymath and scholar DD Kosambi, whose writings on ancient India used, albeit not mechanically or uncritically, a Marxist mode of analysis.

One might, with only slight exaggeration, characterise the intellectual history of independent India as a struggle for space and influence between liberals and leftists. Some centres, such as the Delhi School of Economics, were dominated by liberals; others, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, by Marxists. In between the liberals and the Marxists were the socialists—influenced by Lohia and Narayan rather than Marx or Lenin. Socialist intellectuals foregrounded the community rather than the individual or the state. Thus, they asked for greater affirmative action on the basis of caste, and for the village community to be made the locus for economic development.

The intellectual debates between these three camps were often stimulating, and always sharp. Liberals thought colonialism had been both good and bad for India; socialists and Marxists painted British rule in the darkest hues. Liberals asked the state to limit its powers so as to retain the autonomy of the individual; Marxists wished the state to intervene actively in economic and social life. Liberals preferred for India to forge closer ties with the West; Marxists demanded a pro-Soviet foreign policy. Marxists insisted on the primacy of class; socialists on the primacy of caste; liberals on the primacy of the individual.

Altogether missing from these debates were the voices of conservatives. For, while disagreeing among themselves, liberals, Marxists and socialists between them dominated intellectual life in independent India. They controlled the most influential

university departments and research centres, as well as state-funded bodies such as the Indian Council of Social Science Research and the Indian Council of Historical Research.

These scholars, who came to prominence before and soon after Independence, in turn trained and nurtured younger generations of liberals and socialists. But this was not mere ideological indoctrination; it was also in keeping with the spirit of the times. Newly free of colonial shackles, India and Indians were restless, determined to modernise and industrialise, to spread ideas of reason and rationality, to eliminate social backwardness, and caste prejudice in particular, to end poverty, and rural poverty in particular. The future beckoned; the past stood in the way.

Some personal history may be relevant here. I joined Delhi University in 1974 to pursue a BA degree. Ten years later, I finished a doctorate in Calcutta. In the 40 years that I have lived and worked among Indian scholars, I have met, read, and been shaped by the words (whether spoken or printed) of hundreds of social scientists and historians. Among these have been plenty of Marxists, Maoists, Ambedkarites, Lohia-ites, fellow liberals, classical liberals, Nehruvians and Gandhians, many of whom I have named in this essay. But I cannot recall meeting, in any classroom or seminar hall, a single scholar who identified himself as “right-wing,” or articulated views that might fit that description. Such was, and perhaps still is, the thoroughgoing dominance of liberal and left-wing thought in the Indian academy.

In the generation or two before mine, the leading Indian historians, judged in terms of scholarly output and prominence, included Irfan Habib, RS Sharma, Ranajit Guha, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Amalendu Guha, Sumit Sarkar and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, all of whom were influenced to a lesser or greater degree by Marxism; and Ashin Dasgupta, Dharma Kumar, Parthasarathy Gupta, Amales Tripathi, Rajat Kanta Ray, Mushirul Hasan and Tapan Raychaudhuri, all of whom were liberals. The leading political scientists included the liberals Rajni Kothari, Bashiruddin Ahmed and Ramashray Roy; the Marxists Javed Alam and Partha Chatterjee; and Ashis Nandy, an admirer of Tagore and Gandhi who, like them, stoutly resists being classified in conventional terms. The pre-eminent sociologists were MN Srinivas and André Beteille, both of whom would have owned the label “liberal,” and TN Madan, who while working on classically conservative themes such as family, kinship and religion most likely sees himself as a liberal too. Even the best-known and most influential economists of the 1960s and 1970s—such as KN Raj, Amartya Sen, VM Dandekar, Amit Bhaduri, Krishna Bharadwaj, Pranab Bardhan, Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik and Ashok Rudra—tended to be on the left of the ideological spectrum.

In *How to Be a Conservative*, Roger Scruton claims that “in Britain and America some 70 per cent of academics identify themselves as ‘on the left.’” My own experience of teaching in those countries supports this claim. In the leading academic institutions of the United States and the United Kingdom, conservative intellectuals see themselves as being under siege. The situation in the top research centres in India is even more dire. Here, conservatives do not even have the consolation of being in a significant minority. They are not just marginal, but are, often, absent altogether.

| FOUR |

I NOW ASK: were there ever any influential conservative intellectuals in India?

The answer must be a qualified yes. Three names come to mind: the historians Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and Radha Kumud Mookerji, and the sociologist GS Ghurye. In the first half of the twentieth century, these scholars eloquently articulated a view of Indian nationhood that rooted it in Hindu culture and consciousness. Now largely forgotten, they were very influential in their day, and their work impacted public debates on the past, present and future of India.

Born in 1888, RC Majumdar had a long and active professional career. His doctoral thesis, published in 1918, was based on the premise that the spirit of cooperation is very important in the life of a nation. In this work, Majumdar argued that “India at present is very backward in this particular aspect of culture,” but “things were very different in the past.” He sought to demonstrate that “the spirit of cooperation was a marked feature in almost all fields of activity in ancient India and was manifest in social and religious as well as in political and economic life.” The book had two chapters on “Corporate Activities in Political Life” in ancient India, and one chapter apiece on corporate aspects of economic, social and religious life, respectively.

Majumdar was trained as a historian of ancient India. He wrote books on the Vedic age and on the history of ancient Bengal. His own very positive assessment of his chosen period is best reflected in the titles of two other books he wrote: *Hindu Colonies in the Far East* and *The Study of Sanskrit in South-East Asia*. The spread of Hindu ideas and institutions overseas, he argued, was proof of their vitality and influence.

In the 1950s, when he was approaching the age of 70, Majumdar turned his attention to the modern period. The fruit of his labour was *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, published in 1962. In its preface, Majumdar explains why, having devoted more than 40 years to working on ancient India, he undertook, “at the fag-end” of his life, to write a history of the struggle for Indian independence. Thus he remarked:

The official history of the freedom movement starts with the premise that India lost independence only in the eighteenth century and had thus an experience of subjection to a foreign power for only two centuries. *Real history, on the other hand, teaches us that the major part of India lost independence about five centuries before, and merely changed masters in the eighteenth century.*

From there, Majumdar charges that India was partitioned in 1947 principally because “Muslim intransigence” placed “communalism above nationalism” during the freedom movement.

Majumdar was greatly influential in his time, and was read well beyond the academy. In the 1950s, he curated and edited a book series entitled “The History and Culture of the Indian People.” These presented Indian culture as having reached its apogee during the ancient period, and as having had its integrity and vitality hurt first by Muslim invaders and then by the British. The recovery of the values and institutions of the classical Hindu past, then, became a key task in the building of the nation, now independent once again.

In writing thus, Majumdar was—as he himself pointed out—going against the dominant strain of thinking on the freedom struggle. For Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and others, the real break in the history of India had come with the arrival of the British. The Europeans were truly alien, whereas Muslims had been in the subcontinent for much longer and had integrated themselves into the indigenous population. Islam first arrived in India via Arab traders; thus the “Mapilla” Muslims of Kerala, a community that dates to at least the eighth century. The Turkish and Central Asian invaders who came later to northern India could be brutal, yet the Hindus who converted to Islam in the medieval period did not necessarily do so in order to escape death or persecution. Often the converts were from the low castes, and saw in the comparatively communitarian ethos of Islam an attractive alternative to the rigid hierarchies of Hinduism. In some places, such as Bengal and Kashmir, conversion was led by Sufi mystics rather than marauding armies.

For Gandhi in particular, the unity of Hindus and Muslims was fundamental to the making of Indian nationalism. The activities of Muslim conquerors did not, he thought, invalidate his claim. As he argued in his 1910 book, *Hind Swaraj*:

India cannot cease to be a single nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. India has ever been such a country.

Gandhi saw the Hindu–Muslim conflict as artificial, caused, or at least intensified, by the cynical divide-and-rule politics of the British colonialists. Other nationalists went so far as to speak of a “composite culture,” whereby, after the first shock of invasion, Hindus and Muslims collaborated in the running of the state, in the making of great works of art and architecture, and, perhaps most of all, in the sphere of Indian classical music. This cultural fusion was said to be most fully elaborated in north India—hence the term *Ganga–Jamni tehzeeb*, denoting the syncretic culture said to have flourished in the lands watered by the Ganga and the Jamuna.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of this theory came from Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in his Presidential Address to the Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress in 1940:

It was India's historic destiny that many human races and cultures and religions should flow to her, finding a home in her hospitable soil, and that many a caravan should find rest here. Even before the dawn of history, these caravans trekked into India, and wave after wave of newcomers followed. This vast and fertile land gave welcome to all, and took them to her bosom. One of the last of these caravans, following the footsteps of its predecessors, was that of the followers of Islam. This came here and settled here for good.

... Full eleven centuries have passed by since then. Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. If Hinduism has been the religion of the people here for several thousands of years, Islam also has been their religion for a thousand years. Just as a Hindu can say with pride that he is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so also we can say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam. I shall enlarge this orbit still further. The Indian Christian is equally entitled to say

with pride that he is an Indian and is following a religion of India, namely Christianity.

Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievement. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour.

... This joint wealth is the heritage of our common nationality, and we do not want to leave it and go back to the times when this joint life had not begun. If there are any Hindus amongst us who desire to bring back the Hindu life of a thousand years ago and more, they dream, and such dreams are vain fantasies. So also if there are any Muslims who wish to revive their past civilisation and culture, which they brought a thousand years ago from Iran and Central Asia, they dream also, and the sooner they wake up the better.

BEFORE RC MAJUMDAR CHALLENGED this thesis of a composite culture, another Bengali historian of ancient India did likewise. This was Radha Kumud Mookerji, whose books included biographies of the emperors Ashoka and Chandragupta, a history of the Mauryan Empire, a study of Indian shipping in ancient times, and another of local government in ancient India. But perhaps his most powerful historiographical intervention was a short study—something between a pamphlet and a book—entitled *The Fundamental Unity of India*, first published in London in 1914, and reissued in a second, revised edition in Bombay 40 years later.

The Fundamental Unity of India had as its principal target the claim that political unity in India was largely or solely a creation of British rule. But it also had a secondary target; namely, the growing belief among nationalists that a future Indian nation-state should—in view of the large existing Muslim population—not be built on Hindu principles alone.

For Mookerji, the consciousness of Indian nationhood pre-dated arrivals of both the British and the Muslims. Thus he remarks that the “Rishis of old” coined the name Bharatavarsha to describe the whole of India. This name derived from Bharata, a historical hero who, Mookerji claims, was to India what Romulus was to Rome. As additional proof of the ancient unity of India, he points to a celebrated hymn of the Rig Veda, which, by invoking rivers in different parts of the subcontinent, awakened “the people’s consciousness to the fundamental unity of their country.”

Mookerjee argues that “this intense passion for fatherland, indeed, utters itself throughout Sanskrit literature.” Hence the *Vishnu Sahasranamam*, which invokes the thousand names by which Lord Vishnu was known across this territory called Bharatavarsha. This ancient national consciousness was furthered by Sankara, who, in the eighth century, established four places of pilgrimage—Badrinath-Kedarnath in the north, Rameshwaram in the south, Dwarka in the west and Puri in the east—“so that the entire country may be known by the people and the whole area held sacred.” This network of Hindu holy places made people “think and feel that India is not a mere congeries of geographical fragments, but a single, though immense, organism, filled with the tide of one strong pulsating life from end to end.”

The practice of pilgrimage, Mookerji claims,

allows no parochial, provincial sense to grow up which might interfere with the growth of the idea of the geographical unity of the mighty motherland; allowed no sense of physical comforts to stand in the way of the sacred duty of intimately knowing one’s mother country; and softened the severities of old-world travelling by breaking the pilgrim’s route by a holy halting place at short intervals.

Mookerjee also argues that, apart from a common religion, politics also played a part in “producing this popular consciousness of Indian geographical unity.” He makes the extravagant claim that “history records the names of many Indian rulers who succeeded in realising their ambition of establishing a suzerainty over the whole of India”—Harshavardhana, Samudra Gupta, Chandragupta and Ashoka were for him examples of such rulers.

These examples and illustrations confirm—to Mookerji, at any rate—that “early Hindu history unmistakably shows that the political consciousness of the people had from very early times grasped the whole of India as a unity.” This, he suggests, was further illustrated by the colonisation and Indianisation of territories such as Java, Sumatra, Bali, Siam and Cambodia:

this propogation of Indian thought and institutions was undoubtedly the work of countless colonists and missionaries, carried on through centuries, whose zeal must have been fed by a rich and stable national self-consciousness developed

on a common soil and country. The colonising movement was (and always is) but the crest of a wave of popular enthusiasm for the country created and sustained by the realisation of its individuality and sacredness, a profound appreciation of all that it stands for, its ideals and institutions.

Mookerji was a serious historian, but many of the claims in *The Fundamental Unity of India* are untenable. Writing as he was, in 1914, by the “whole of India” he meant the entire territory under both direct and indirect British rule, thus including the so-called “princely states.” Yet the ancient monarchs he mentions had little presence in this territory’s south, and were largely absent from its west as well. Even the admittedly large areas they ruled over later came under the hold of many different kings, chiefs, states and chiefdoms. To think that the sense of political unity engendered by Ashoka in the third century BC endured a millenium later—as Mookerji was suggesting—beggars belief.

Mookerji’s language is noteworthy. He uses “Hindu” and “India” interchangeably. Muslims and Christians are missing from the narrative, but so—more strikingly—are the varieties of caste, tribe, language and sect that have historically been such a marked feature of the Indian social landscape. Sanskrit was spoken or understood only by the priestly elite; the hymns Mookerji saw as emblematic of national unity would have been unknown or incomprehensible to the majority of the population.

These simplifications and elisions were necessary to “prove” the conservative historian’s fundamental point—namely, that Indian nationalism was and must always be Hindu in its essence. The first-person plural in Mookerjee’s political philosophy is strictly (and narrowly) defined by religion.

It is always hazardous to interpret a scholar’s published work in light of his personal biography. Still, it may not be entirely irrelevant that Majumdar and Mookerji were both Hindu Bengalis who came of age at a time of great trauma and religious strife in their province. Bengal was partitioned on religious lines in 1905; after a popular upsurge led by the Hindu middle-class of Calcutta, the partition was undone six years later. The first edition of *The Fundamental Unity of India* was published in the wake of that first partition, and the second edition in the wake of the second partition, when Bengal’s Muslim-majority districts came to constitute East Pakistan. Both divisions, undertaken at the behest of Muslim politicians and parties, must also have had an effect on Majumdar, who was born in what was to become East Pakistan, and later taught for two decades at the University of Dacca. After 1947, when he lived in post-partitioned India, he was unable to even visit his ancestral village or the city where he first made a name as a scholar and teacher.

A THIRD PROMINENT CONSERVATIVE intellectual of the late colonial period was GS Ghurye, who, unlike Majumdar and Mookerji, hailed from the west rather than the east of India, and was a sociologist rather than a historian by training. Ghurye taught for many years at Bombay University, where he supervised a number of PhD students while writing his own books.

Where other Indian sociologists were keen to study the impact of modernisation, Ghurye was equally interested in the persistence of tradition. His books include studies of Indian sadhus, costume and classical dance, and a comparative study of family and kinship in Indian and European culture. In writing these works, he drew on his formidable knowledge of Sanskrit, as well as on his wide reading in archaeology, linguistics, anthropology and art history. His was emphatically a “book-view” of Indian society, based on materials found in the university library rather than through field investigations of how Indians actually lived and laboured.

Like Mookerji, Ghurye was deeply concerned with establishing a unitary culture for all of India. The social anthropologist Carol Upadhyaya writes that one of his central concerns “was to demonstrate the unity and antiquity of Indian civilisation. He believed that Hinduism is at the centre of India’s civilisational unity and that at the core of Hinduism are Brahminical ideas and values that are essential for the integration of society.”

This is reflected in Ghurye’s exchanges with the British-born anthropologist Verrier Elwin on the status of tribals in Indian society. In a series of monographs and pamphlets written in the 1930s and 1940s, Elwin argued that the tribes of central India were culturally distinct from Hindus. Although their pantheon occasionally included Hindu gods, their society was not internally stratified by caste, while women had far more independence. They also had their own distinctive traditions of art, music and dance.

Where Ghurye was an old-fashioned scholar who worked in the library, Elwin spent 20 years living with the adivasis he wrote about. His was a “field-view” of tribal society. He published important monographs on agriculture, craft technology, religious organisation, crime and sexual practices among different tribal communities. His rich empirical research was presented in vivid and attractive prose, gaining him a wide readership in India and abroad.

In 1943, Ghurye published a book-length attack on Elwin entitled *The Aborigines—So Called—and their Future*. In it, he claims that “everything savouring of the Hindu upsets Mr Elwin,” and offers many illustrations of the parallels between tribal and Hindu beliefs. Rather than see tribal groups as autonomous and distinct, Ghurye argues that they are “the imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society.” While Elwin believed that independent India should afford adivasis both cultural and territorial autonomy, for Ghurye the task for the nation-in-the-making was to bring them ever closer to the Hindu mainstream.

In 1954, after two decades living with and writing about the tribes of the Indian peninsula, Elwin moved to the north-east of the country. Now an Indian citizen, he was appointed an advisor to the administration of the North-East Frontier Agency—present-day Arunachal Pradesh. In 1957, he published the influential *A Philosophy for NEFA*, which was re-issued in an expanded edition two years later, with an appreciative foreword by Nehru, then prime minister. In this book, Elwin argued once more for the protection of tribal rights over both land and forests, and for the preservation of tribal artistic and cultural traditions.

Elwin died in 1964. In 1980, when Ghurye was 87 years old, he published a fresh attack, this time on Elwin’s work on the north-east. He charged the anthropologist with indirectly abetting separatist movements by promoting “the revivalist perpetuation of the habits, dress and customs of NEFA.” Elwin, Ghurye claims, had willy-nilly collaborated in the “balkanisation of Bharat,” in the potential sundering into pieces of the motherland. For Elwin was “a revitaliser of almost all the cultural complex of these tribes, a complex which is most inconsistent with the cultural complex of the rest of India (Bharat).”

The fear of diversity masked as a plea for national unity—this is a classically conservative trope, also manifest, for example, in the suspicion of Spanish-speaking immigrants among US conservatives, or of Arabic-speaking immigrants in Europe.

Majumdar, Mookerji and Ghurye were all formidable scholars. They each had an impressive body of published work to his name. They each taught for decades in universities, where they communicated their knowledge—and their opinions—to generations of students. Outside the classroom, they supervised doctoral theses, thus further shaping the course of their respective disciplines.

There are no contemporary analogues of Majumdar, Mookerji and Ghurye, no conservative historians or sociologists as prolific or as influential. Nor have there been for the past several decades. This raises the question: why did India have prominent conservative intellectuals while under alien rule, and why has it seen so few of them (if any) since?

Here is a possible answer. In the late colonial period, as the nationalist movement took shape, there were intense political and intellectual debates on the possible contours of the future nation: whether the political institutions of a free India would be defined by a single religion, or many religions, or by no religion at all; how linguistic and ethnic diversity would be managed. After Independence, however, these debates were foreclosed by the political, and in time institutional, victory of the liberal and socialist viewpoints, whose most charismatic and influential advocate was India’s first and longest-serving prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

This is not to say that Nehru’s own views were hegemonic, uncritically adopted by intellectuals. Notably, his most articulate critics were to the left of the ruling Congress Party. They included the socialists Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan, and the communist EMS Namboodiripad, all of whom attracted to themselves, and their parties, many gifted writers and scholars. The more general mood also favoured liberals and socialists, for a new nation wished to look forward, to leave behind the detritus of tradition and colonialism in constructing a fair and just society.

| FIVE |

AT THE END OF 2014, assembly elections were held in the states of Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir. Their results were a little-noticed turning point in the political history of independent India. Now, for the first time, the BJP has more legislators in state assemblies than the Congress. Since May 2014, it also has a majority in the lower house of parliament, and it is likely, with the support of its allies, to soon have a majority in the upper house as well.

It seems safe to say that in the short-to-medium term the dominance of the BJP will continue. Its main rival, the Congress, won a mere 44 seats in last year’s general elections, and has since lost power in several states. A revival of the party under its present leadership is extremely unlikely. Yet so habituated are party members to rule by a single family that the overthrow of the Nehru-Gandhis by rank-and-file Congressmen seems unlikely too. The Congress may thus go the way of the British Liberal Party, a once dominant political machine reduced to insignificance in the affairs of the nation.

If the situation of the Congress is dire, that of the Communists is disastrous. In recent years, they have lost power in West

Bengal and Kerala, the two major states where they were earlier significant. Whereas in Kerala they might still be a force, in West Bengal their influence is set to recede even further. The Communists once had a presence in industrial cities such as Mumbai and Kanpur, but that, too, has vanished.

Also bleak is the political future of the socialist parties that once commanded much influence in north and east India. No longer motivated by the ideas of Lohia or Narayan, they are now vehicles for individual or familial ambition. Although they are currently in power in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the erstwhile socialists of the Janata Parivar fared very poorly in these states in the general elections. They may be hard-pressed to retain power when assembly elections are next held in these states.

The transformation in India's political landscape is therefore momentous. The centre-left and the left are in disarray. The right is regnant, and likely to be so for some time. However, the rise of the BJP has not yet been accompanied by a growth in serious intellectual work from the right of the political spectrum.

The phenomenon of right-wing political dominance without an intellectual ecosystem to support it is not unknown in modern history. It was prevalent, for example, in some countries in inter-war Europe and post-war Latin America, and, most recently, in the decade-long rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa and his party in Sri Lanka.

Few Indians, I think, would wish for their country to go the way of the Argentina of Juan Perón or the Sri Lanka of the Rajapaksas. Thus the oft-expressed wish that the BJP become more like the Christian Democrats of Germany or the Republicans of the United States—namely, a conservative party that stops some distance short of being chauvinist or reactionary. If this softening of the BJP were to happen, then the party would—like its counterparts in the West—have to find or nurture a cast of serious scholars and thinkers on the right.

How might this happen? As I see it, the precondition for a conservative intellectual renaissance must be the construction of a first-person plural which is not based on religion alone. To adapt Scruton's ideas for the Indian context, conservative thinkers must recognise the significance of "a national rather than a religious 'we,'" where Hindus "concede to others the right to be different" in the god or gods they worship. They must recognise that Christians and Muslims, as well as animists and atheists, have equal right to full citizenship without changing their faith or recognising the primacy of Hindus, Hinduism and Hindutva.

A major hurdle to the growth of this non-denominational conservatism is the massive influence currently exercised by the RSS over the political landscape. The organisation has always had a deep antipathy towards those who are not Hindus. The leading RSS ideologue MS Golwalkar—who served as the group's *sarsanghchalak*, or head, from 1940 to 1973—identified Muslims, Christians and Communists as the three groups whose fidelity to Bharat Mata remained suspect. In a speech in Delhi in December 1947, Golwalkar said that "no power on earth could keep them"—Muslims—"in Hindustan. They should have to quit this country." Nine years later, he remarked that "whatever we believed in, the Muslim was wholly hostile to it. If we worship in the temple, he would desecrate it ... If we worship cow, he would like to eat it. If we glorify woman as a symbol of sacred motherhood, he would like to molest her. He was tooth-and-nail opposed to our way of life in all aspects—religious, cultural, social etc. He had imbibed that hostility to the very core."

In his book on the RSS, the *pracharak* turned sceptic DR Goyal brilliantly summarized the Sangh's ideology as follows:

Hindus have lived in India since times immemorial; Hindus are the nation because all culture, civilisation and life is contributed by them alone; non-Hindus are invaders or guests and cannot be treated as equal unless they adopt Hindu traditions, culture etc ... the history of India is the history of the struggle of the Hindus for protection and preservation of their religion and culture against the onslaught of these aliens; the threat continues because

the power is in the hands of those who do not believe in this nation as a Hindu Nation; those who talk of national unity as the unity of all those who live in this country are motivated by the selfish desire of cornering minority votes and are therefore traitors; the unity and consolidation of the Hindus is the dire need of the hour because the Hindu people are surrounded on all sides by enemies; the Hindus must develop the capacity for massive retaliation and offense is the best defence; lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the Sangh is born with the divine mission to bring about that unity.

Goyal adds that "without fear of contradiction it can be stated that nothing more than this has been said in the RSS shakhas during the past 74 years of its existence." He was writing in 1999—but nothing more has been said in those *shakhas* in the past fifteen years either. Indeed, recent statements by the current *sarsanghchalak* of the RSS, to the effect that India is "a Hindu

Rashtra” and that non-Hindus must acknowledge their Hindu parentage, or, better still, convert to Hinduism, confirm that Goyal's succinct encapsulation of the RSS's ideology remains as valid as ever.

Here, then, is a difficult but necessary task for prospective conservative intellectuals: to detach their ideas from those of the RSS. For the Sangh and its ideologues represent not conservatism, but bigotry and reaction.

To seek equal citizenship for Muslims and other religious minorities one need not nostalgically evoke the old nationalist idea of the “composite culture.” There never was a pure past of complete harmony, as the proponents of *Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb* would have us believe. But nor were Hindus and Muslims always at each other's throats, as ideologists such as Golwalkar would have us believe. Hindu–Muslim relations before 1947 were complicated—harmonious and peaceable in some places and epochs, bitter and conflict-ridden in others.

After 1947, when Pakistan was constituted as a Muslim homeland, India chose not to base its own political system on a single religion. Since India was not to be a “Hindu Pakistan,” Muslims, Christians and other minorities had equal rights of citizenship. Thus, as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in October 1947, “we have a Muslim minority who are so large in numbers that they cannot, even if they want, go anywhere else. That is a basic fact about which there can be no argument. Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilised manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic State.”

Nehru's prescription was—the pun is inescapable—absolutely right. There are now close to 200 million Muslims in India, and perhaps another 70 million Indians of faiths other than Hinduism. A Golwalkar-inspired RSS may wish to treat them as second-class citizens who must keep their heads down, as Jews and Christians were compelled to in the Muslim polities of the Middle Ages. The organisation is still obsessed with the memory and legacy of Partition, as are many right-wing voices on social media. But surely intellectuals should tailor their thought to the practical realities of India today, rather than rehearse and replay the political debates of other eras and centuries. The religious and linguistic diversity of the Indian republic cannot be wished away, nor can it be crushed by asking Muslims and Christians to take periodic oaths of loyalty.

Proud patriots on the right shall be offended by my praise of a white Englishman, Scruton, and of an Anglicised Indian, Nehru. So let me now turn indigenous. If Indian conservatives are looking for a historical role model from within India itself, they need look no further than C Rajagopalachari. As Gandhi's “Southern Commander” during the freedom struggle, “Rajaji” held important political posts in independent India, serving as the governor of West Bengal, the governor-general, the home minister and the chief minister of Madras. Increasingly disenchanted with the socialist policies of Nehru, Rajaji left the Congress. In 1959, he started an organisation of his own, called the Swatantra Party, which stood for radically reducing the state's control over the economy, and over other aspects of social life.

Rajaji characterised the Nehruvian state as a “License–Permit–Quota Raj.” In a 1959 essay, he sharply attacked the “megalomania that vitiates the present development policies.” What India needed, he wrote, was “not just big projects, but useful and fruitful projects ... Big dams are good, but more essential are thousands of small projects which could be and would be executed by the enthusiasm of the local people because they directly and immediately improve their lives.” Speaking more generally, Rajaji argued that “the role of the Government should be that of a catalyst in stimulating economic development while individual initiative and enterprise are given fullest play.”

Nehru dismissed Rajaji's economic ideas as out of date, but in fact they anticipated the trends of the future. In 1991, the government finally began to liberalise the economy. This was done under a Congress prime minister, PV Narasimha Rao, who dismantled some elements of the “Permit Raj,” but not as many as free-market advocates had hoped for. While Rajaji's ideas on the economy have been largely vindicated, other aspects of his social philosophy await rediscovery and reinterpretation. He was a deeply religious man, who wrote popular works on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In an essay from 1961, entitled ‘The India We Want,’ he wrote that he wanted “the State to know its limitations and function in humility and the citizens to realise spirituality through the traditional channels inherited by them in that regard.”

Rajaji could see beyond the pieties and prejudices of his own caste and faith. Among Gandhi's close disciples, he was the only one who understood, and fully supported, the campaign against untouchability. Himself an Iyengar Brahmin, in a famous case in 1924 he defended a *panchama*—the term then current for untouchables in Madras—who had gone to a temple to pray but was cast out by the priests for allegedly defiling a sacred space.

Rajaji was also committed to Gandhi's programme of inter-religious harmony. In September 1947, he was governor of West

Bengal when Gandhi went on a fast to stop the Hindu–Muslim violence then raging in Calcutta. In a note to the central government, he warned it to be vigilant about the “communal hatred” spreading all across India. When Gandhi was assassinated, in January 1948, Rajaji wrote:

May the blood that flowed from Gandhiji's wounds and the tears that flowed from the eyes of women everywhere when they learnt of his death serve to lay the curse of 1947, and may the grisly tragedy of that year sleep in history and not colour present passions.

Like his mentor Gandhi, Rajaji cannot be easily pigeon-holed into the convenient labels of modern political thought. Was he liberal, conservative, or socialist? As I have said elsewhere, if forced to choose, one would have to call him a conservative (lower case): but still, a rather special kind of conservative. A man who knew him well, the Australian diplomat Walter Crocker, provided this capsule summary of his personality:

Endowed with an exceptionally strong and quick mind, Rajaji was in spirit harmonious and without volatility or anything partaking of the theatrical. Vanity was excluded from his nature. Although he had so much affinity for traditional India, he knew the lore of the West, having a good acquaintance with the Bible and Plato and the English classics as well as with Jurisprudence and Economics; and he knew the case for economic development. Although he was religious, and conservative, he was not conformist. He had the true conservative's trait of combining scepticism about what man-made systems can do for human nature with the personal kindness to individuals which socialists, dealing with human beings as statistical groups and abstractions, sometimes lack. And he had wit, that life-renewing gift.

Rajaji's independence of mind was strikingly revealed in the last months of Nehru's life. After the 1962 war with China, Nehru sensed that India could not afford two hostile fronts. So, with his own health failing and in a bid to solve the Kashmir dispute and secure an honourable settlement with Pakistan, in April 1964 he released Sheikh Abdullah, Kashmir's most popular leader, who had been incarcerated on flimsy charges for more than a decade.

The move was bitterly condemned by the Jana Sangh. But it was supported by Rajaji, who argued that freeing Abdullah could act as a prelude to allowing “the people of Kashmir [to] exercise their human right to rule themselves as well as they can.” In words that ring as true in 2015 as they did in 1964, Rajaji wrote of the need to try and think fundamentally in the present crisis. Are we to yield to the fanatical emotions of our anti-Pakistan groups? Is there any hope for India or for Pakistan, if we go on hating each other, suspecting each other, borrowing and building up armaments against each other—building our two houses, both of us on the sands of continued foreign aid against a future Kurukshetra? We shall surely ruin ourselves for ever if we go on doing this ... We shall be making all hopes of prosperity in the future, a mere mirage if we continue this arms race based on an ancient grudge and the fears and suspicions flowing from it.

Rajaji's role in this forgotten peace initiative is stirring proof of his sagacity and courage. He deplored “the unfortunate chauvinism ruling Delhi”—enshrined both in the Jana Sangh and among large sections of the Congress party—which stood in the way of solving the Kashmiri tangle and, through doing so, resolving the larger India–Pakistan dispute. While he opposed Nehru's economic policies, on this crucial national issue he stood with him as one. As Rajaji saw it, “self-determination for Kashmir is as far as we are concerned a lesser issue than the aim of reducing Indo-Pak jealousy.” And, he wrote, “the idea that if we ‘let Kashmir go,’ we shall be encouraging secessions everywhere is thoroughly baseless.”

After meeting Nehru in Delhi, Abdullah travelled to Madras to meet Rajaji. To the Kashmiri patriot, Rajaji presented a proposal that would allow Jammu to remain in India, Azad Kashmir to stay in Pakistan, and the Valley—the crucial bone of contention—to be jointly administered by both countries with assistance from the United Nations. The Sheikh then took what became known as the “Rajaji Formula” to Nehru, and, following his approval, headed across the border to discuss it with Pakistan's leaders. Nehru died while the discussions were on, and the hopes of a permanent settlement over Kashmir died with him.

Rajaji's stance on Kashmir was emblematic of his vision for India, a vision far wider than that held by the likes of MS Golwalkar. In 1968, a decade after he had founded the Swatantra Party, he remarked of the Jana Sangh that it “has quite a few good leaders ... What is needed however is a broadmindedness that not just practices toleration but looks upon Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis and others as politically and culturally as good as Hindus.”

Half a century later, the Jana Sangh's present incarnation, the BJP, also has quite a few good leaders. But both the BJP and its parent organisation, the RSS, are yet to achieve the broad-mindedness that Rajaji had hoped for. The conclusion is inescapable: there can be a credible conservative intellectual tradition in India only if it emerges outside the ecosystem of the

Sangh Parivar. Rather than the liberals and leftists whom they currently target, self-aware and self-conscious conservatives should really be vigilant of the reactionaries who dominate the discourse on the right. Otherwise, India might go the way of the Italy of the 1920s or the Argentina of the 1950s—a polity ruled by a right-wing party, with a right-wing demagogue as its elected head, where public discourse is defined by thugs and bigots rather than by scholars and thinkers.